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ABSTRACT

A study of two tragic events that took place at an Indian residential school in British Columbia underlines the profound impact the residential school system has had on Aboriginal communities in Canada throughout this century. One event was the death of a runaway boy and the other was the suicide of another boy while both were students at the Williams Lake Indian Residential School at St. Joseph's Mission during the early part of this century. Embedded in their stories is the complex relationship between government, church, and Aboriginals that continues to this day. An examination of the European assumption that their society is inherently superior to that of Native peoples and should be imposed on them for their "best interests" is followed by a description of the Shuswap life style and how they responded to the arrival of Whites and the accompanying smallpox epidemic. A history of the early years of the St. Joseph's Mission school illustrates differences in child rearing and educational philosophy between Natives and Whites and documents complaints about the operation of the school. The circumstances surrounding the two deaths are recounted, as are the government investigations that followed. Although there was ample evidence that students were poorly fed and clothed and were subjected to physical and sexual abuse, the government chose to overlook facts that would have undermined its control over Native peoples. The history of the residential school is followed to 1981 when it was closed. The controversy over the residential schools and their continuing effects on Native families, individuals, and communities is examined. An appendix contains an address by northern Shuswap Chief Bev Sellars to the First National Conference on Residential Schools in 1991. Includes end-notes, photographs, and an index. (TD)